

STUDIES IN LITERATURE AND LANGUAGE

Vol. 2, No. 1, 2011, pp. 1-18

www.cscanada.net

ISSN 1923-1555 [Print]

ISSN 1923-1563 [Online]

www.cscanada.org

## Eight Types of Obscure Poetic Images

LIU Huiqing<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** The fundamentally “monologic” poetry seems “resistant” to the readers, to a remarkable extent, in that they contain obscure images inside to help convey ideas. That the image as the signifier can be arbitrary, and that the signified could be infinite are so confusing that the poetry is believed sometimes “unreadable”. By analysing the eight types of the obscurity of the poetic images in Yeats’ works, the essay wishes to help found a constructive way to read and interpret the poems.

**Key words:** Obscure; Poetic image; Infiniteness; Symbolism

Poets are those who love best to speak with images and they do best in this. Poetic Images which do not have effective appeal to readers are called obscure, difficult—“effective appeal” here refers to a kind of state of understanding where the reader feels *clear and easy*; they will not ask perplexedly such a question frustrating to the poet: “what is the idea you are saying with the images?” As once Yeats was faced with the candlestick-maker’s question: “What is the meaning of ‘I came like water and like wind I go’?”<sup>2</sup>

Poetry is fundamentally “monologic”, it is “a hermetic and self-sufficient whole”, especially with its images. Bakhtin thought that “There must be no distance between poet and his word”, and we may induce that the same is true of the poet and his image: poetry is “a place where language is more free, where the signifier and signified are the most disconnected.”<sup>3</sup> Poetic image seems to be speaking in a monologic language, and even speaking in a mute language, mute especially when it speaks with a kind of *obscure simplicity*. The above question would not have been there if the poetic image had been defined as, e.g., “I came like water and like wind I go *in such an easy, free, peaceful, blissful... way*?”<sup>4</sup> However Yeats was just the poet who believed that “the symbol without emotion is more precise and, perhaps, more powerful than an emotion without symbol.”<sup>5</sup> And Yeats, in 1914, claimed that as the general achievement of modern

<sup>1</sup> Female, got an MA in Comparative Literature, at University College London, in 2004. Now she works as an English lecturer with the English Faculty of College of Humanities and Development, China Agricultural University, Beijing, China. She mainly researches on comparative literature, and the second language learning strategies. Two of her poetry books, two novels as well as other academic papers have been published during the recent years. She also helped a lot in having several books on Chinese villagers’ self-governance published as a vice chief editor.

<sup>2</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.7.

<sup>3</sup> Klages, Mary, *Mikhail Bakhtin*, at <http://www.Colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/bakhtin.html>, 2003, p.1. The author continued to discuss in a sense of Feminism that “this, in Cixous’ view, links fiction and realism to the attempt to make linear, fixed meaning (where one signifier is associated clearly with one and only one signified), which is what the French feminists call masculine, or phallogocentric, writing.”

<sup>4</sup> It was just contrary to what Pound said: “Don’t use such an expression as ‘dim lands of peace’. It dulls the image. It mixes an abstraction with the concrete. It comes from the writer’s not realizing that the natural object is always the adequate symbol.” Cited in Sidnell, Michael J., *Yeats’s Poetry and Poetics*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996, p.8, note 9.

<sup>5</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Autobiographies*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979, p.487.

\*Received 18 November 2010; accepted 28 January 2011

poetry: "the whole movement of poetry is toward pictures, sensuous images, away from rhetoric, from the abstract, toward humility."<sup>6</sup> He seemed quite in great favor of the *obscure simplicity*.

To consider images, first we learn from John Unterecker, who discussed the possible definitions of "Image": "The substantive from which a metaphor can be constructed", which seems to him "does not communicate very much"; the second, "Image" is "a sign which has the potential of becoming metaphor or symbol"; thus by creating a metaphor for image, "an image is a sign stretching toward symbols". He seems to think that the term "substantive" is awkward, he turned it into "sign"—he explained it in grammatical terms, an image must be a "substantive—a noun, pronoun, verbal noun, or other part of speech used as a noun equivalent"<sup>7</sup>, yet what in the real world is this substantive? What is a sign? Why is a sign to become a symbol?

Originally an image is the referent of Saussure's linguistic "sound"—the written form, the word as well—that where we got it, e.g., the word "tree" we see in the book is the signifier; it has its referent maybe outside our window, say, an apple tree, which is the signified of the word. This tree outside the window originally was merely an objective existence—let's call it the "original object". It was a sign, for it meant nothing. Yet once we see it, once it begins to exert influence on us, e.g., it makes us think it is beautiful—giving us an aesthetic experience, it turns itself into an image already; if further, our subjectivity gets active enough to participate into its objective existence, e.g., as a poet, I bring it into my poem to say "I feel happy to see the beautiful tree", it's accordingly becoming a more dynamic image.

So we see we cannot make it an image without adding *something extra* to the original object. Yet as well we cannot get rid of the tree as the original object: we see the word "tree", associating the same time with the original tree and its possible symbolic significance, we *feel* the word in its two levels: its denotations and its connotations<sup>8</sup>. Yeats believed that his poetry had "gained in self-possession and power": he got redeemed by the "unknown writer" speaking in Mrs. W.B. Yeats' automatic writing: "we have come to give you metaphors for poetry", a "system of symbolism".<sup>9</sup> Yet Yeats was quite aware that his readers "will be repelled by what must seem an arbitrary, harsh, difficult symbolism."<sup>10</sup>

## 1. THE NECESSARYNESS OF AN IMAGE: THE IMAGE'S MEMORY<sup>11</sup>

Yeats divided symbols into two groups: emotional symbols, which include "all alluring or hateful things", and intellectual symbols, "symbols that evoke ideas alone, or ideas mingled with emotions".<sup>12</sup> The necessity involves mainly the intellectual images: because of its history it has formed a tradition of being used to convey certain ideas. For the intellectual images, almost it's really more of an academic issue: in order to

---

<sup>6</sup> Yeats W.B., *Uncollected Prose* by W.B. Yeats, 2, (ed., John P. Frayne & Colton Johnson), London: Macmillan, p.414.

<sup>7</sup> Unterecker, John, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, p.33.

<sup>8</sup> In this sense I cannot get myself into agreement with what Barthes said of a "sign": "A sign (for example, the sign of 'rose') can be emptied of its denotative meaning and a new connotative meaning piled into it. Thus 'rose' becomes a signifier for 'passion' (a signified), making a totally new sign, a sign on the second level."<sup>8</sup> The word "rose" is the signifier of the real flower of "rose", and it's signifier of the abstract "passion"; the viewer of the signifier views the two signifieds, he can evade from neither of them.

<sup>9</sup> Yeats, W.B., *A Vision*, London: Macmillan, 1969, pp.8-9.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p.23.

<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless Barthes could be no more accurate to say that it is culture that provides the sign significance on the second level, the new meanings—except that "that drains original signs of their denotation"—"lifts them into a connotation that is culture—specific, fitting a certain ideology, a certain set of values, beliefs, ways of seeing." Barthes, Roland, *Mythologies* (trans. Annette Lavers), New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.p.79. Also Racine is right in believing that "It is in the region lit by this verbal memory that poetry finds the springs of its vitality"; "His highest ambition is to awaken—or to reveal—the latent sonorities, those 'emotional abstracts' which poetry discovers half-way between sensations and ideas." Vinavier, Eugene, *Racine and Poetic Tragedy* (trans. P. Mansell Jones), Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955. p.79.

<sup>12</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.160.

get a whole understanding of what the image is representing, one need know its hidden bank of memory: its cultural background, including religion, myth, its tradition, history, mostly its former literary use. Yeats used almost all of these.

Yeats once meditated on Victor Hugo's assertion that "it is in the theatre that the mob becomes a people." And Yeats got his own philosophy that the theatre achieves that because it "takes up the traditions of the past and shapes them into such a form that they can become the ideals of the present and the substance of the future";<sup>13</sup> also Yeats had studied Nietzsche who thought that without myth a culture would lose its "healthy natural creative power: it is only a horizon encompassed with myths which rounds off to unity a social movement."<sup>14</sup> A nationality's shared memory, recognition, he believed that myths were "the mothers of nations", raising men into "a world of selfless passion in which heroic deeds are possible and heroic poetry credible".<sup>15</sup> In this the poet, the nationalist got obsessed especially with Irish myths. Yeats's use of Irish mythology always has "a double intent: it recalls into the present those figures that are part of a national memory, and adds to their memorability, thus creating national consciousness as well as drawing upon it."<sup>16</sup> For he had the belief that "The power of memory was also a memory of power".<sup>17</sup>

Yeats also blended myths from several cultures: Greek and Celtic, pagan and Christian; sometimes he is drawn to mythical images and characters, like swans, which belong to several systems and epochs. Yeats requires far more than the myths, he made full of all resources. T.R. Henn told exactly what Yeats requires from his reader intellectually:

Yeats' poetry reflects at every turn his esoteric studies, his gatherings of folk-lore, his occultism; the background of his Sligo boyhood; the patronage and protection of Lady Gregory; his concern with Indian philosophy and myth; his readings of Plotinus and Henry More; the mosaics which he saw in Sicily and at Ravenna; his studies of Blake and Calvert; his obsession, at a certain stage, with Greek and Roman sculpture; his readings of Castiglione, Boehme and Spengler; his many friendships, and that passionate hatred through which, as I believe, he grew<sup>18</sup>.

He continued for a whole page for the intellectual requirement for a future editor of Yeats, including such as "French poetry", "some theosophy and Rosicrucian literature", "knowledge of statuary and of mosaics, of Egyptian, Greek, and Byzantine art", and even he has to be a "musician"... The list was too long. It could be no more obvious that no reader in general sense can achieve that high-standard and many-aspect intellect, the poetry can be forever fatally obscure. So, if considering the poetic aesthetics, sometimes it is no point focusing on the "resources" of the poetry, but the central is poetry itself, the reader's understanding of it.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, Yeats as the poet can be criticized as "less helpful in his lengthy Note to *The Secret Rose*, giving us a great deal of irrelevant information about Irish legends and their source, and telling us nothing about the real meaning of this beautiful, powerful and important poem."<sup>20</sup> What Yeats did was just what the scholars are doing, and it is just contrary to the usual act of reading: they are laboring in among the possible resources of the poem, while the reader stays outside of the library, sometimes making an attempt to guess. And as Yeats himself observed, "a hundred generations might write out what seemed the meaning" of a

---

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Greaves, Richard, *Transition, Reception and Modernism in W.B. Yeats*, Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002, p.51.

<sup>14</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Complete Works* (ed. Levy), *The Birth of Tragedy* (trans. Haussman), p.174.

<sup>15</sup> Yeats W.B., *Uncollected Prose* by W.B. Yeats, 1, (ed., John P. Frayne, London: Macmillan, p.104.

<sup>16</sup> Craig, Cairns, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry: Richest to the Richest*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982, p.46.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p.73.

<sup>18</sup> Henn, T.R., *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, London: Methuen & Co Ltd., 1965, p.xvi.

<sup>19</sup> One, with some common sense in culture and literature, could almost get a *understanding*—good enough, but sometimes maybe wrong—which could work for him as a reader of poetry. Let's take as an example Yeats's *The Rose upon the Rood of Time*, and try to guess what it is to talk about, before we plunge ourselves into shelves of "dusty volumes on the shelves" (Maud Gonne's irony) on Yeats: "the Rose" refers in our common sense to beauty; but once it gets "upon the rood", then we should associate with religion, with human sufferings and sacrifice, divinity; if the "rood" is "of time", then we come into the concepts of Time and Eternity, mortality and the immortal soul. Alas! Exactly these are just the themes of this poem.

<sup>20</sup> Thurley, Geoffrey, *The Turbulent Dream: Passion and Politics in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, London: University of Queensland Press, 1983, p.33.

given symbol, "and they would write different meanings, for no symbol tells all its meaning to any generation".<sup>21</sup>

## 2. ARBITRARINESS<sup>22</sup> BETWEEN THE SIGNIFIER/IMAGE AND THE SIGNIFIED

A poetic image can be the sufficient but not the necessary in performing their aesthetic function or symbolic function, e.g., the poet can refer to wind, or rainbow, or snow to signify nature's peace. The reader gets confused about why the poet used one, but not another. Difference and distance cause obscurity.

First, the Aspect Personalization of the Image.

### A. Personalized conception, categorizing

Here we may borrow from Keats a most famous image of confusing ideas in his nightingale. Archibald Macleish says a lot of the last sentence of the Ode as "one of the most hotly debated statements in English literature"<sup>23</sup>:

Beauty is truth, truth beauty, —that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.

Macleish cites from Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch, editor of Oxford Book of English Verse, that "that is a vague conversation"; and T.S. Eliot, that the statement "seems to me meaningless"; whereas Robert Bridges, who did not admire the ode as a whole, thought the last lines are "very fine and make a sort of recovery with their forcible directness." Whether the lines are "meaningless" or "forcible" is decided mainly by the fact whether the men who make the judgment agree, or not, with Keats's self-invented ideology about the conceptions of "truth" and "beauty", how wide the two are defined, and about how "beauty" could be equaled to "truth". The aestheticism could identify Truth as a kind of Beauty, yet the other philosophers would rather that the two concepts are far away from each other. The logical or recognitory disagreement may lead to the strongest obscurity.

### B. Private Religion, Philosophy

Although Yeats was against a poet conveying his philosophy into his poetry, he believed that "wisdom first speaks in image". Yeats in this may well have been influenced by Coleridge, who advocated that "the imagination not only structured our world, but also revealed the truth about it, because the imagination was an 'echo' of the divine act of creation".<sup>24</sup> Also Coleridge said of Bowles who had "indeed the sensibility of a poet, but he has not the great passion of a great poet...he has no native passion because he is not a thinker"<sup>25</sup>.

---

<sup>21</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.148.

<sup>22</sup> There might be still another part discussing about "the necessaryness in and after arbitrariness": I find I cannot agree with Racine if "for him, there are no words which are poetical by birth" (See in Vinavier, Eugene, *Racine and Poetic Tragedy*, trans. P. Mansell Jones, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1955. p.79). His "no words" also deprived the "rose" as a word as an image accessibility to its innate poetic sense. For in the case of the "rose", it must have been poetical before any culture, for it has charmed almost every culture to sing of it: there were some pre-history reasons, for its shape, its scents. Why Yeats, the poet who hated flowers so much as to say "Why can't you English poets keep flowers out of your poetry?" (See in Letters on Poetry, p.190) he got perhaps the more overwhelmed with the Rose? Why this irresistible Rose symbolizes wisdom? Why can people see in the Rose a "terrible beauty", "a life of tragic beauty and heroism"? (See in Jordan, Carmel, *A Terrible Beauty: The Easter Rebellion and Yeats's "Great Tapestry"*, London/Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1987, p.94.) My conclusion is: the Rose was born poetical, but it was not so multivalently poetic as it is now with its giant bank of memory.

<sup>23</sup> Macleish, Archibald, *Poetry and Experience*, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1960. p. 176.

<sup>24</sup> Craig, Cairns, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry: Richest to the Richest*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982, p.27.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Wimsatt, W.K., JR., *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954, p.107.

Yeats saw that “the imaginative arts were therefore the greatest Divine revelations”<sup>26</sup>, “All symbolic art should arise out of a real belief”.<sup>27</sup> Yeats was to a large extent influenced by French Symbolists. He must have agreed to Gide who called the work of art a “crystal, a partial paradise” where the idea unfolds as a flower does, in its original purity”; “Every phenomenon is the symbol of a truth. The poet’s duty is to manifest it. As the poet contemplates the symbols of the world, he penetrates at the same time their deepest meanings.”<sup>28</sup> Thus the “transcendental Symbolism” is the construction of a paradise of ideal in particular philosophy of the poet. That’s the poet’s vision. Yeats also sang highly of Shelley’s Intellectual Beauty,<sup>29</sup> an imaginative Intellectual vision. Yeats finally identified his Rose with the Intellectual Beauty, which endowed him with his private motif, subject matter. The poetic image conveying too much personalized motif will not appeal efficiently.

### C. Private Motif, Subject Matter

In *Leda and Swan*, the last lines seem to jump out of a queue, far away from previous descriptions of sexual intercourse of a human and a swan:

Being so caught up,  
So mastered by the brute blood of the air,  
Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

In addition to the Greek mythology, the reader has to know about how the poet got motivated to write the poem; Yeats gave the following statement as necessary explanation:

“I wrote *Leda and the Swan* because the editor of a political review asked me for a poem. I thought, ‘After the individualist, demagogic movement, founded by Hobbes and popularized by the Encyclopaedists and the French Revolution, we have a soil so exhausted that it cannot grow that crop again for centuries’. Then I thought, ‘Nothing is more possible but some movement from above preceded by some violent annunciation’. My fancy began to play with *Leda and the Swan* for metaphor, and I began this poem; but as I wrote, bird and lady took possession of the scene that all politics went out of it, and my friend tells that his ‘conservative readers would misunderstand the poem’.”<sup>30</sup>

### D. Private Emotions into the Image, and Its Accumulation

Yeats let his furious emotions pour into the woman image of Maud Gonne, and the “rose”. In the late eighties, Yeats wrote, he had had three interests: “interest in a form of literature, in a form of philosophy, and a belief in nationality”.<sup>31</sup> To complete this list, he need only have added Maud Gonne. Besides his Ireland, Maud Gonne was destined to become his central interest, and also destined to become his primary subject matter.

### E. Personalized Familiarization, Intimation

Yeats was obsessed with the image of “apple blossom” because really of his private experience, for it is associated with Maud Gonne’s luminous beauty at their first meeting: “Her complexion was luminous, like that of apple-blossom through which the light falls, and I remember her standing that first day by a great heap of such blossoms in the window”.<sup>32</sup> In “*Baile and Ailinn*” there is the “two sweet blossoming

---

<sup>26</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.112.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, p.294.

<sup>28</sup> Fowle, Wallace, *Poem and Symbol: A History of French Symbolism*, London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1990, p.13.

<sup>29</sup> As Maritain sang highly of Baudelaire, of “the incomparable power of intellectualization and spiritualization of sensuality, and the implacable strength of his introverted vision”, so his poem “has been transformed into a single missile conveying a single irresistible intuition—with an immensely increased power of penetration. Its external structure remains the same, but its inner concentration is not the same; all its parts, in reality, are only joined together by the fire of the poetic intuition”. See Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, pp.262-3.

<sup>30</sup> Allt, Peter & Alspach, Russel K., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957, P.828.

<sup>31</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Explorations*, New York: Macmillan, 1961, p.263.

<sup>32</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Autobiographies*, London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1979, p. 123.

apple-boughs"; in "The Arrow" the beauty's "face and bosom / Delicate in colour as apple blossom"; in "The Song of Wandering Aengus" the "glimmering girl / With apple blossom in her hair". The image of "apple blossom" was always an emotional disturbance, sweet infatuation because of his personal experience of critical significance.

This, too, happened to *The White Birds*: after Maud Gonne refused the first of Yeats's marriage proposals to her, she once remarked that she would like to be a seagull, if she were a bird.<sup>33</sup> Although Yeats explained that "The birds of fairyland are white as snow",<sup>34</sup> but let us suppose Maud Gonne had instead mentioned a "pale cloud", then it becomes doubtful whether we shall expect the now poem *The White Bird*. In this, experience is central in forming an object an image.

#### F. Private angel, Perception; Personal taste

Gentle or wild hair, was the French Symbolists' favorite image, also in Pre-Raphaelite paintings of women. Yeats, addicted to the two artistic schools, could not avoid the image. The image of hair serves almost everywhere to imply both the abstract femininity and the concrete women, most frequently in the poems written to Olivia Shakespear<sup>35</sup>. It was with Olivia Yeats felt at complete relaxation, felt his "infinite repose"; in the Rose lyrics there was everywhere unease, but not so in the whole of "the Wind Among the Reeds", which is "no less than a kind of charm to keep the forces of violence asleep."<sup>36</sup> The refuge of hair appears as the "hiding hair" in *The Heart of the Woman*; in *He bids his Beloved be at Peace*:

...let your eyes half close...  
...your hair fall over my breast,  
Drowning love's lonely hour in deep twilight of rest,  
And hiding their tossing manes and their tumultuous feet.

*The Cap and Bells*: "It had grown sweet-tongue by dreaming / of a flutter of flowerlike hair"; in *The shadowy Water*: "Bend lower, that I may cover you with my hair"... Sometimes the image cannot avoid turning to be so obscure to make it difficult to tell whom it is referring to, e.g., in *He reproves the Curlew*: "your crying brings to my mind / Passion-dimmed eyes and long heavy hair". It can be, most probably, Maud, for "passion" more often is related to her; or Olivia who appears as the "dim hair" in *The Lover Mourns for the Loss of Love*.

And we may as well have a look on his frequently used image of "pale". This is Yeats's favorite image of color:<sup>37</sup> "honey-pale moon", "pale tide", "pale dew", his beloved's "pale brows", "cloud-pale eyelids", "pale breast", "pearl-pale hand"...the light and indifferent tone of melancholy everywhere. In *The Symbolism of Poetry*, Yeats worked out his own version of two lines of Burns's poem, with the incomparable "melancholy beauty", in eyes of Yeats:

The white moon is setting behind the white wave,<sup>38</sup>  
And Time is setting with me, O!

Yeats made this mistake maybe from deliberateness in his "subconsciousness", for he loves the "whiteness", he thought these lines are "perfectly symbolical": "Take from them the whiteness of the moon and the wave, whose relation to the setting of Time is too subtle for the intellect, and you take from them their beauty." The "whiteness" together with the other symbols "evoke an emotion which cannot be evoked

---

<sup>33</sup> Albright, Daniel, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, London: Everyman, 2003, p.440.

<sup>34</sup> Allt, Peter & Alspach, Russel K., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957, p.799.

<sup>35</sup> Albright, Daniel, *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*, London: Everyman, 2003, p. 453.

<sup>36</sup> Thurley, Geoffrey, *The Turbulent Dream: Passion and Politics in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, London: University of Queensland Press, 1983, p.32.

<sup>37</sup> Yeats found in the poetry of Mr. Bridges "the pale colours", which, he said, "had I the great gift of praising, I would praise". See in Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.202.

<sup>38</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.155. Primary note: "Burns actually wrote: "The wan moon is setting ayont the white wave," but Yeats's version has been retained for the sake of his comments."

by any other arrangement of colours and sounds and forms”.<sup>39</sup> The word and image of “pale” is just the more delicate version of “whiteness”.

Yeats also paid much attention to eyelids, he had his own angel as an unaccomplished painter. He described in his vision the “vague Grecian eyes gazing at nothing, Byzantine eyes of drilled ivory staring upon a vision, and those eyelids of China and India, those half-veiled eyes weary of world and of vision alike.”<sup>40</sup> But since it seems there has been almost nobody else who has sung of the beloved’s eyelids, so I put this part into the discussion about “estrangement”, “defamiliarization” of image.

### 3. ARBITRARINESS OF IMAGE/SYMBOL DESIGNATION

It’s contingency and subjectivity in symbolization: Yeats is the poet who worked for his own free will to say typically the Yeatsian slogan “I declare this tower is my symbol”. Also in *Coole and Ballylee, 1931* the natural image of “the mounting swan” is appropriated as symbolic:

Another emblem there! That stormy white  
But seems a concentration of the sky;  
And, like the soul, it sails into the sight...

The two parts of the figure balance rhetorical assertion and symbolic assumption. An emblem being a figure arbitrarily designated, the swan, here, is made emblematic by virtue of the poet’s calling it such, though “the soul...sails into sight” in some grace beyond the poet’s, or anyone’s, control or knowledge.

The image of the Rose performs most abundantly in its symbolic and aesthetic function, with all its materialistic attributes, its richest cultural background, and Yeats’s *poetic will*: “red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days!” The rose is no longer merely natural, cultural, but privately emotionalized as on a designated mission. The poet picked it up to put it first upon “an aesthete’s stage set” to adorn, and make it a “concentrated changed symbol”, “a magical talisman as it were to conjure past associations of beauty and love”,<sup>41</sup> anything else the poet wanted to sing ode to, anything he wanted it to be.

I will study the Rose later as a major image. Now let’s look at the image of “the moon” to see how the poet got it changed, or distorted, or, just how he got new elements stylistic of his into the image. Let’s suppose what would happen if a reader who’s used to the everyday scientific communicative logic who gives the “interrogation” (italic) on what Yeats said, in that we see the obscurity of poetry results partly from certain gap between men’s multiplied understandings from subjectivity:

The Moon is the most changeable of symbols,  
—*Is this a necessary superlative?*  
and not merely because it is the symbol of change.  
—*The “symbol of change” is already artificial enough, thanks to his own invention, or some former poets in history.*  
As mistress of the waters  
—*The “mistress of the waters”, what an address to the moon?*  
she govern the life of instinct  
—*What is the cause-effect logic in here? Waters necessarily symbolize instinct?*  
and the generation of the things...;  
—*I’d prefer to think of the Sun...*  
and, as a cold and changeable fire  
—*No, more like water, not fire: who give you power over the familiarized normal metaphor (this is “abnormal”)? How could you see fire in that piece of cool, white—a little bit blue-white thing?!*

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pp.155-6.

<sup>40</sup> Cited in Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p.55.

<sup>41</sup> Rudd, Margaret, *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W. B. Yeats*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1953, p.140.

- set in the bare heaven, she governs alike chastity and the joyless idle drifting hither and thither of generated things...
- Ah, subjectivity! Free will! (Got it!)
- Because she only becomes beautiful in giving herself,
- How dreadful, if considering this “giving herself” in terms of Feminism!
- and is no flying ideal,
- “Ideal”...
- she is not loved by the children of desire.<sup>42</sup>
- This negative statement is wrong, and its concerning none but the “children of desire”, is just ridiculous!

#### 4. THE CLASSICAL AND THE DEFAMIALIZED

Love has been such a great and most spectacular theme in poetry. One of Byron's masterpieces was *Maiden of Athens*: “you are my life, I love you”. “I love you”—in this world, all through the human history, how many mouths there have been to utter this single sentence? Here it comes to the Aristotelian conception of rhetoric: “meaning plus style, what plus how”—how to say it? We may have a best understanding on this challenge every poet faces: “Only the mythical Adam, who approached a virginal and as yet verbally unqualified world with the first word, could really have escaped from start to finish this dialogic inter-orientation with the alien word that occurs in the object.”<sup>43</sup> Ever since Adam made his first utterance, Adam's and Eve's daughters and sons are struggling to say things with the same meaning but they pain in order to say in some other way.

Byron's utterance is the classicism: he resorted to the easiest metaphor—the beloved and his life. But how should Yeats say it? He was now in the middle of the history of art which “has much more the nature of a perpetual revolt against the norm”.<sup>44</sup> He had to say differently, to seek some new angel, or specific character, or new deformation. A poet cannot escape from the issue of the Formalist estrangement. The imagination is “imperious”,<sup>45</sup> and Yeats was too great a poet to follow route of cliché: his mind can never “do the same thing twice over”; “having exhausted simple beauty an meaning, it passes to the strange and hidden, and at last must find its delight—having overrun its harmonies—in the emphatic and discordant”; “when a subject-matter ceases to move us we must go elsewhere”.<sup>46</sup> He had estranged eyes.

The technique has its evolution, its verisimilitude and vicissitude. Yeats, when still a boy, watched and was fancied by an “amorous” older student in art school who was excited by his mistress's eyebrow<sup>47</sup>. So Yeats played the game well by keeping an eye on his beloved's cloud-pale eyelids: in He tells of the Perfect Beauty: “O cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes”—he was fascinated with this expression—then “her cloud-pale eyelids falling on dream-dimmed eyes” in He tells of a Valley full of Lovers; even the Secret Rose is “Among pale eyelids” (The Secret Rose).

Yet the transformation cannot go too far, for the poet was to combine the intimate and the refreshed, the familiar with the estranged. He had discussed this with his father: “I remember your once writing to me,” Yeats recalled when writing to his father in 1912, “that all good art is good just in so far it is intimate”<sup>48</sup> Yet

---

<sup>42</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.91. Yeats attempted to prove that Shelley, a “child of desire” if ever one lived, distrusts the moon or sees it at best as an object of pity: “The Moon's lips ‘are pale and waning,’ it is ‘the cold Moon,’ or ‘the frozen and inconstant Moon’...or it is like a ‘dying lady’ who ‘totters’ ‘out of her chamber led by the insane and feeble wanderings of her fading brain’” (*Essays and Introductions*, p.92.)

<sup>43</sup> Holguist, Michael, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holguist), Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, p.278.

<sup>44</sup> Mukarovsky, Jan, *Structure, Sign, and Function*, London: New Haven, 1978, p.54.

<sup>45</sup> Craig, Cairns, *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry: Richest to the Richest*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982, p.27.

<sup>46</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.289.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Yeats, W.B., *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* (ed., Allan Wade), London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1954, p.568.



in 1914, John W. Yeats wrote to his son on “intensity” to emend his previous opinion: intensity conveys itself through “a strangeness yet with something familiar—one’s secret heart answers to it as to a language learned in one’s infancy and then forgotten”.<sup>49</sup>

## 5. PURELY PICTORIAL/VISUAL IMAGE

This is the plain, objective presentation of image in poetry, being without any finite emotional/ideological additives, even without any memory<sup>50</sup>. The difficulty in this type of image lies first in the distance from written language back into picture. Here it involves two types of the act of seeing: visual seeing, and imaginary seeing. Visual seeing refers to the visual conduct of seeing the real things, the object, e.g., a flower blooming in the garden you visit; but also when you see this flower in painting or photos or so. Imaginary seeing refers to the fact that you may see this in your memory, or imagination, when somebody describes it for you; or in your dream. If purely pictorial image appears in a poem as a name, it is very likely that you cannot see it in your imaginary vision. That’s the difficulty caused by the distance between literal description and imagination: we must turn the word back into the referent. Sometimes this is challenging, in the case of a flower you have never seen before, or, you have never observed attentively. And, some times the case can be just subtle: now suppose you have no idea about the smile of Mona Lisa, how can some one depict it to you in words well enough to let you know it as exactly it is?

Also there are different sources of pictorial images: a), what the poet really sees in the real world; b), what he sees in his unconsciousness, brought out from deep in his soul into poetry; c), dream image. We seem to have said enough about the first situation. Yeats himself told of his writing in subconsciousness, during sleep: “I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very unlike dreaming, when these image took upon them what seemed an independent life and became a part of mystic language” with “a reckless obscurity”.<sup>51</sup> The difficulty of these images which “took upon themselves” could be easily understood if we just try to return onto our dream to get the memory of a particular object: most usually they even do not have colours!

That’s the visual difficulty. Also there’s especially the emotion-idea-association difficulty. People tend to believe everything means something else besides its objective signified in general sense. This could be confusing, while the concepts of “center image” and “periphery image” are our concern. I use “center image” to refer to the main symbols in poetry, mainly the dominant symbol—the Rose, of course—whereas the “periphery image” is presented only to contribute a general atmosphere, some element of the whole picture of a poem, not necessarily related to the theme closely.

For Yeats was the poet who saw in the paintings “a delight in form without regard for ‘meaning’, he followed Rossetti in that they “loved form and colour for themselves and apart from they represent.”<sup>52</sup>

“He has made, after the manner of his kind,  
Mere images.”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> J.B. Yeats, *Letters to his Son and Others 1869-1922* (ed. Joseph Hone), London: Faber and Faber Ltd., p.193.

<sup>50</sup> Yeats also wrote in 1916: “A poetical passage, cannot be understood without a rich memory”.<sup>50</sup> I think this should get some occasion excluded where there is only purely pictorial image, natural emotion. Suppose now I stand at the Lethe wharf, I may even taste the keener beauty of the image of “a rose”—since I can assume that I remain literate at there, not having been reduced intellectually to something like a tree, or else; and, I can feel the sorrow in the face of a sad Holy Mother, since I believe that I at there will not lose all the inborn emotions. In this sense the purely pictorial image is at the polar opposite to the intellectual, and quite far away from the emotional images, for they evoke pure visual pleasure, and some portion of our aesthetic standard came to us when we were born—a baby, say, is more likely to smile when seeing dolls in bright colours.

<sup>51</sup> Allt, Peter & Alspach, Russel K., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957, p.800.

<sup>52</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, P.53.

<sup>53</sup> Found in Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p.v.

But the readers, becoming already too alert about the connotative function of poetic image, they are apt to be as sensitive as Maritain as to believe that "We see nothing, yet we feel there is something to be looked at."<sup>54</sup> When they try to guess some symbolic meaning which is in fact not contained in the image, the intended plain image is sophisticated.

## 6. PERIPHERY IMAGE INTO CENTER IMAGE:

Above I have said of the pure signs. They are images which can be called periphery. Periphery image is of at least formal significance in poetry as it is in painting, and, it is to work up the atmosphere, an environment for the coming into center stage of the main image. Also there are occasions where the poet exercises centralization of periphery image, a periphery image as an object, being turned into a symbol. Unterecker's definition of "Image" that it is "a sign which has the potential of becoming metaphor or symbol" serves to tell a sign from a symbol, the two from "image": "an image is a sign stretching toward symbols".<sup>55</sup> An image, even one only contributing to the subordinate imagistic framework or atmosphere of the poem, can be seemingly meaning more than that structural function, or, even sometimes this periphery image can be elevated into a center one, as absolutely a symbol, referring to something far different from its denotative meaning.

In "Adam's Curse":

We sat grown quiet at the name of love;  
We saw last embers of the daylight die,  
And in the trembling blue-green of the sky  
A moon, worn as if it had been a shell  
Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell  
About the stars and broke in the days and years.

I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.

The moon, when first coming into the sky, acted as rather a periphery image together with the "embers of daylight", "the trembling blue-green of the sky"; though they were already injected into certain sadness, passion, they were but the descriptive elements. The moon, more than all of them, was "worn", "as if it had been a shell / Washed by time's waters as they rose and fell / About the stars and broke in the days and years", we cannot but feel there must be something else in this image with the tone of "inauspicious omen". It is proved that at the end of the poem, the moon takes the center position and makes itself a manipulating symbol, for it is "we" now: "we'd grown / As weary-hearted as that hollow moon." The poet and his woman, one crazy for his love, the other addicted to her revolution aspiration, since the one is already at the verge of tragic despair of love, he had pity upon her wild dream he thought hopeless as well. The original periphery image serves as a center image to embody the wired tragicness of sorrowful fate itself.

Yeats not only searched Irish and mystical traditions for divine symbols but strained to elevate all the images of his poetry to symbolic status, on the understanding that "an image that has transcended particular time and place becomes a symbol, passes beyond death, as it were, and becomes a living soul."<sup>56</sup> "The transformation of image into symbol in Yeats's terms requires that its natural, temporal context be thoroughly reconstituted through poetic figuration:

With the earth and the sky and the water, re-made, like acasket of gold  
For my dreams of your image that blossoms a rose in the deeps of my heart

---

<sup>54</sup> Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, p.265.

<sup>55</sup> Unterecker, John, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, p.33.

<sup>56</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.80.

*The Lover tells of the Rose in his Heart*

Contained in the gold casket into which nature has been transmuted, are the dreams of the image of a woman, that blossoms metaphorically into a rose. The metamorphosis of the referent could hardly be more thorough; and that is the poet's way of endowing the natural being with eternal life—making her into a symbol or 'living soul'".<sup>57</sup>

## 7. KINESTHESIA OF IMAGE/MUSICALITY

The so-called imaginary seeing is to encounter another even more serious challenge when it is to see the motion of image. Can the imaginary/illusionary vision catch up with the speeding of the moving images:

A sudden blow: the great wings beating still  
Above the staggering girl, her thighs caressed  
By the dark webs, her nape caught in his bill,  
He holds her helpless breast upon his breast.

How can those terrified vague fingers push  
The feathered glory from her loosening thighs,  
And how can body, laid in that white rush,  
But feel the strange heart beating where it lies?

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

The dynamics in the image motion is overwhelming, jumpingly active: one could even hear the soft sound of his wings taping on her body. Yet not everyone can work out a clear scene which the poem described so vividly. Frustrated by his rather slow imagination, and thus the obscure picture in his mind, he may quit from his efforts to understand what idea the poet was to convey.

Yet the intensity of emotion cannot help pushing forward and strengthen the motion of images. When the despaired lover dreamed of a shift in the solid image of the beloved, a moving gesture of her for a "change":

O heart! O heart! If she'd but turn her head,  
You'd know the folly of being comforted.  
The Folly Being Comforted, 1902

John Unterecker gives the definition, in grammatical terms, of image as necessarily "a substantive—a noun, pronoun, verbal noun, or other part of speech used as a noun equivalent".<sup>58</sup> Here there is hidden an image—the turning of the head, in the lines, also in the now her head without turning around, a double difficulty in the image presentation. Yet the turning of the beloved's head in imagination both of the poet and his reader will be blissful, it will bring tenderness and desire flooding back; the non-existence of the image is even more empowered.

The winds that awakened the stars  
Are blowing through my blood  
Maid Quiet, 1892

Motion in these two lines is really too quick, and it jumps. It might have been re-written like this:

It was the winds who awakened the stars (who were as if sleeping), (because when the winds began to blow, the stars seemed startled and they have gone)

---

<sup>57</sup> Sidnell, Michael J., *Yeats's Poetry and Poetics*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd., 1996, p.7.

<sup>58</sup> Unterecker, John, *A Reader's Guide to William Butler Yeats*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, p.33.

Those winds now seem to be blowing through my blood now (because my blood can feel their freshness, and its own getting refreshed—this is only one of the possible “because”, of course)

In Nietzsche’s sense it is the “spirit of music” that gives birth to poetry. In Rilke’s gloss it becomes a “flowing, unapplied force that does not enter our works in order to recognize itself in phenomena, but hovers over our heads uncaring, as though we did not exist”; “Music (rhythm) is the untrammelled superabundance of God, who has not exhausted himself in phenomena.”<sup>59</sup> Yeats himself argued that the poet should be only content to find his pleasure in all that is “for ever passing away that it may come again”, in momentary passion, “in whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned”.<sup>60</sup> This refers to the aesthetic in tragicness of mortality, and he seemed to assert as well that the “most fleeting” is the “most impassioned”. From within a state of intoxicatingly intensity of emotion, the utterance of the poet can be of fleeting fluidity, like the sound of music advancing forward, or like a wild “dance”<sup>61</sup>, to use Yeats’s own term.

## 8. THE GAP, INCONSISTENCY IN BETWEEN IMAGE COUPLING, PARTNERSHIP

There are seemingly strange, unintelligible juxtaposition of images in poetry. Study the two middle lines of the following poem:

O cloud-pale eyelids, dream-dimmed eyes,  
The poets labouring all their days  
To build a perfect beauty in rhyme  
Are overwhelmed by a woman’s gaze

And by the unlabouring brood of the skies:  
And therefore my heart will bow, when dew  
Is dropping sleep, until God burn time,  
Before the unlabouring stars and you.

### 8.1 He Tell of the Perfect Beauty, 1896

The union of the images of “a woman’s gaze” and “the unlabouring brood of the skies”, also their cooperation in the last line: “the unlabouring stars and you” is one out of contingency or consciousness: the woman is forever there, but how did the poet got the star from the *idle* universe? At that time he happened to look up to see the stars in the sky? Or the stars are already an “unlabouring” image compared to the poet always in endless labor to sing ode to beauty? Or he remembered then Shelley’s eternal symbol “the Morning and Evening Stars”<sup>62</sup> which meanwhile symbolize Intellectual Beauty? While in *Leda and the Swan* the juxtaposition is intended for sure, to echo Yeats, an intellectual juxtaposition of images:

A shudder in the loins engenders there  
The broken wall, the burning roof and tower  
And Agamemnon dead.

The sexual “loins” and Leda’s eggs caused the fall of Troy, the death not only of Agamemnon.

The more difficult may be the coupling of images out of subconsciousness. We find too frequently especially in *The Wind Among the Reeds* the juxtaposition and even confusion—one intruding and hiding the other—of the images of Maud Gonne and Olivia Shakespear. If we read a poem with coupling images, as if of free association, seeming to us without logic sequence and definite bond between each other, the

---

<sup>59</sup> Rilke, poems 1912-1926, (trans. Michael Hamburger), London: Anvil Press Poetry, p.12.

<sup>60</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.288.

<sup>61</sup> And Yeats added to this the sense of motion: “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” Found in Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p.xi.

<sup>62</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.88.

images are just inconstant, jumping, we may turn to Freud for his model of interpretation of certain images in dreams: he asks the dreamer "to report...in succession everything that occurs to him", and if "one listens to these copious associations, one soon notices that they have more in common with the content of the dream than their starting-points alone"; the images themselves will "throw surprising light on all the different parts of the dream, fill in gaps between them, and make their strange juxtapositions intelligible", and, in the end, everything is bound to be clear, because the union was made in accordance to rules that we have not yet understood.<sup>63</sup>

Yeats himself told about the free-willed centrifugal movement of images from his subconscious<sup>64</sup>: "I had sometimes when awake, but more often in sleep, moments of vision, a state very unlike dreaming, when these image took upon themselves."<sup>65</sup> An easy immediate sample from *To the Rose upon the Rood of Time*:

Come near; I would, before my time to go,  
Sing of old Eire and the ancient ways:  
Red Rose, proud Rose, sad Rose of all my days.

The poet seems to have been singing of his woman, now he comes to sing old Eire. These are overwhelming obsessions in him, so when he sings in passion of one, he cannot help remembering another. As if, a little girl who cried sorrowfully for her robbed chocolate cannot help remembering her doll lost last week and cried for it as well. In Yeats's doctrines of Magic, we find something revelatory: "the borders of our mind are ever shifting, and that many minds can flow into one another"; "the borders of our memories are as shifting". And he gives in his note something more about "subconsciousness": "'subconsciousness' would know clairvoyantly what symbol I had really given and would respond to the associations of that symbol"<sup>66</sup>.

## 8.2 The Readership

There are three levels of poetry meaning: a), the intended signification, by the author; b), the interpreted signification, by the critic; c), the comprehended signification, by the reader. For poetry is a discourse which belongs to a very small number of people, readership is in this issue at stake. And I'd rather discuss how the readership is required, less intellectually, more emotionally, for almost everybody can read Yeats's or some critic's notes, but not everybody gets emotionally ready enough for reading the poems: passion, and, they need a soul.<sup>67</sup>

First of all, it is the reader's cultural background (his poetic I.Q.). The second should be the reader's introspective experience (his poetic E.Q.), where personal experience is at stake<sup>68</sup>. Emotionally men need see into under superficial routine life the inmost depths of human reality, ready to return into the "quietude" where "underneath the region of argument and conscious discourse, lies the region of meditation; here, in

<sup>63</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *New Introductory Lectures in Psychoanalysis* (trans. James Strachey), Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, pp.39-40.

<sup>64</sup> Raine, Kathleen, *W.B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination*, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1999, p.101. See about Rilke: "from beyond this world of feeling we hear, rarely but unmistakeably, another voice, as from an order that would once been called the celestial. Rilke wrote that in our century of the 'great angels behind the stars', whose communications are universal and mysterious, summoning us, as it were, from beyond ourselves—our individual selves—into those regions of 'supreme delight'".

<sup>65</sup> Allt, Peter & Alspach, Russel K., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957, p.800.

<sup>66</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.28.

<sup>67</sup> Yeats mentioned "the soullessness of Burns", see in Bornstein, George, *Yeats and Shelley*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1970, p.44

<sup>68</sup> Jan Mukarovsky hesitates to cite Guyau's "simple" statement on this: "two lovers bending over some love poems like the heroes of Dante and living that which they read will experience deeper enjoyment, even from the aesthetic point of view." See: Mukarovsky, Jan, *Structure, Sign, and Function*, London: New Haven, 1978, p.36. Yet since I feel the more awkward to say something, too correct and direct, too simple, as simple as a general Law, thus I'd like to cite from another a sentence the same plain: "If the artist has less of, say, Beethoven's intense feeling of life, he finds little that demands expression." See in Thurley, Geoffrey, *The Turbulent Dream: Passion and Politics in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*, London: University of Queensland Press, 1983, p.3.

its quiet mysterious depths, dwells what vital force is in us";<sup>69</sup> And, Holderlin thought that "in poetry man concentrates or retires into the inmost depth of human reality. There he penetrates through quietude...in which all energies and relations are at play."<sup>70</sup>

Thus men should "arise and go", to leave "the roadway" or "the pavements grey", the tumultuous everyday life of the city to return to the quietude of *the Lake Isle of Innisfree*, and "shall have peace there, for peace comes dropping slow". The spiritual tranquility is easy for readers because the poem has been always popular. But how about the popularity of a poem named "*the Volcano of Innisfire*" as well written by Yeats who believed in Blake that "Passions, because most living, are most holy"? No, never shall the latter be the more welcomed. At least the Rose lyrics full of passion were not so hot. But how could a poet as an artist in desperate need of high sensibility, remarkable intensity of feeling get his genius by getting rid of his passion?

So the second, passion, intensity of emotion. The poets are seldom liked also because of the tragicness he can but see in life, because they have too passionate love for it. Yeats was "content to find his pleasure in all that is for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in the momentary heroic passion, in whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned".<sup>71</sup> That's also Keatsian Melancholy: "Beauty that must die". To the poet this melancholy is a wakeful anguish of the soul: beauty can never achieve its eternity. It was because of man's passion for life that man felt life a tragedy; and it is for the sake of this painful tragicness that man loves life even more. That's what Yeats told when he said that it is not until a man comes to understand that life is a tragedy that his life truly begins (A, 189). The same was written by Keats:

Ay, in the very temple of Delight  
Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran Shrine...<sup>72</sup>

The sorrow combined with the passion serves here to illustrate what I call a "bow-arrow discipline" of emotion union, e.g., the "sweet woe" of Keats. This often proves to be quite a paradox, a dilemma, much obscure to certain readers. I guess the candlestick maker with whom Yeats got frustrated would ask a question as "If you feel sweet, then why you feel woeful at the same time?" Yeats, when appreciating the "heroic ecstasy", said highly of Dowson's "to us bitter and gay" and called this the "heroic mood."<sup>73</sup> He thought it heroic for the tragic sense in the "bitterness" of life and human struggle against fatality to be "gay". That heroic mood was also seen in the fishermen:

Before I am old  
I shall have written him one  
Poem maybe as cold  
And passionate as the dawn  
*The Fisherman,*

And the "mournful pride" he used to refer to his heroic woman Maud Gonne. The combination of the two emotions of extremity works out a magic power. The good one may lies high in heavenly bliss, the bad one in the abyss. The two work together as the two end points of a bow to make the power like an arrow to be shot.

Coincidentally Yeats wrote something which seems just the interpretation of this:

That shaping joy has kept the sorrow pure, as it had kept it were the emotion love or hate,  
for the nobleness of the arts is in the mingling of contraries, the extremity of sorrow, the  
extremity of joy, perfection of personality, the perfection of its surrender, overflowing  
turbulent energy, and marmorean stillness; and its red rose opens at the meeting of the

---

<sup>69</sup> Cited in Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, p.240. See originally "Characteristics", in *Essays*, Boston: Brown and Tagard, 1860, Vol. III, p.9.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, p.240. Maritain also says (in footnote 13): "Mallarme called the state of poetic experience 'ecstasy'". Just what I am to discuss below.

<sup>71</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.288.

<sup>72</sup> This passion and sorrow for life is so much hated by some *common* people that I heard quite frequently among Chinese people such a remark that "people who do literature must be insane!" How dreadful.

<sup>73</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, London: Oxford University Press, 1940, p.8.

two beams of the cross, and at the trysting-place of mortal and immortal, time and eternity.<sup>74</sup>

It was just the same coincidental that Yeats got his woman of terrible energy the two “images” of “the arrow” and “the bow”. It’s why this woman was so empowered over the poet, and why his poems so empowered over us.

A poetic image, as “a radiant truth”<sup>75</sup> of disengagement and suggestiveness, foregrounded<sup>76</sup> after a careful or subconscious process of selection and then presentation by the author, is staged in an “initial horizon of expectations” of the reader of his former aesthetic experience, as “triggering signals”.<sup>77</sup> Then the image is to project upon the backdrop of the reader something that could be stirred up in the reader’s resources, his background. His aesthetic experience and their Word-Object-Image play are now activated. The ideal paradise for the interaction could be what Blake imagined: “If the Spectator could enter these Images in his Imagination, approaching them on the Fiery Chariot of his Contemplative Thought”!<sup>78</sup>

Yeats said a poet should not seek for what is “still and fixed”, because that “has no life for him”; “his style would become cold and monotonous, and his sense of beauty faint and sickly.”<sup>79</sup> He was careful to interpret his poetry, for he believed “If an author interprets a poem of his own he limits its suggestibility.”<sup>80</sup> For Yeats, the images “became a part of mystic language” to bring revelation; though of “a reckless obscurity”, they are “true symbols”.<sup>81</sup> To get “images reside in a realm of timeless spatiality and simultaneity”,<sup>82</sup> they should be like Mona Lisa’s smile of obscurity open to interpretation. In this “game of the imagination”, the reader’s aesthetic delight only begins when he himself “becomes productive.”<sup>83</sup> Maritain thought this obscurity is even blessing: “If I do not know exactly what a given sign signifies, well, it is then free to signify *everything* for me. In a sense, poetical joy and affective exaltation will then only become vaster in becoming more indeterminate.”<sup>84</sup> That’s the ecstasy of the obscurity in poetic images.

The obscurity of poetic image is its infiniteness, its aesthetic distance, width and depth, its aesthetic vigor. The word presents the image, the image transmits the symbolic meaning. Poetry has in itself the immediate image of painting and intense emotion of music, so it’s limitless in the concepts of time and space, which develops into its aesthetic eternity. So a reader of poetic image is to: 1), see through the image, see into its deep background; 2), draw from his own background his aesthetic experience and apperception, get reactive to the image; 3), be inspired with the image into acute introspection and reflection, dig deep

---

<sup>74</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.255. It was that when I saw the Hollywood movie *Interview with the Vampire* I first got the idea that the movie was fantastic because it combined the most horrible, the most disgusting, and the most beautiful: the music, costume, the appearance of three leading roles at least, and, especially the secret feeling Louie felt toward Clodia. And, also I discussed why Racine’s *Phedre* was so beautiful, in the sense of tragicness, in my former essay “Poetics of Tragedy: the Most Horrible and Painful Beauty of the Love-Landscape”. The main points are: all the superlative tragic elements include: 1. passion of love—yet as taboo, thus the most desperate, thus the most painful, the most beautiful (even in mere sense of aesthetic distance): the passion can never be fulfilled; 2. the most ruthless, unjustified punishment—death, conducted on the most innocent Hippolytus, and the originally most innocent Phaedra; 3. the most irresistible fatality of Fate: the gods are in almighty control of all the tragicness of the events.

<sup>75</sup> Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p.2.

<sup>76</sup> Iser’s reader’s response theory mainly is: “The very process of selection inevitably creates a background-foreground relationship, with the chosen element in the foreground and its original context in the background.” See in Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.13.

<sup>77</sup> Jauss, Hans Robert, *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982, p.23.

<sup>78</sup> Found in Kermode, Frank, *Romantic Image*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957, p.v.

<sup>79</sup> Yeats, W.B., *Essays and Introductions*, London: Macmillan & Co Ltd., 1967, p.288.

<sup>80</sup> Unterecker, John, *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*, London: Thames and Hudson, 1969, p.42.

<sup>81</sup> Allt, Peter & Alspach, Russel K., *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*, New York: The Macmillan Company, 1957, p.800.

<sup>82</sup> Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed.), Introduction to *The Language of Images*, Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1980, p.3.

<sup>83</sup> Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978, p.108.

<sup>84</sup> Maritain, Jacques, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1953, pp.266-7.

into his innermost consciousness and sub-consciousness for his libido. The aesthetic of the obscure poetic image lies in its eternity for it had the second time birth by the reader. The truth is: the understanding of every single line of the poetry deserves our whole lifetime's hard labour.

## REFERENCES

- Albright, Daniel. (2003). *W.B. Yeats: The Poems*. London: Everyman.
- Allt, Peter & Alsapach, Russel K. (1957). *The Variorum Edition of the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Barthes. (1975). *Roland, S/Z* (trans. Richard Miller). London: Cape.
- Barthes, Roland, (1975). *Mythologies* (trans. Annette Lavers). New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bornstein, George, (1970). *Yeats and Shelley*. Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press.
- Cavanaugh, Catherine. (1986). *Love and Forgiveness in Yeats's Poetry*. Michigan: UMI Research Press
- Chadwick, Charles. (1971). *Symbolism*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd..
- Cornell, Kenneth. (1970). *The Symbolist Movement*, Yale: Archon Books.
- Craig, Cairns. (1982). *Yeats, Eliot, Pound and the Politics of Poetry: Richest to the Richest*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press
- Croft, Barbara L.. (1944). *Stylistic Arrangements*. London: Associated University Presses.
- Empson, William. (1977). *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. London: Chatto/Windus.
- Erllich, Victor. (1981). *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*. New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- Fowlie, Wallace. (1990). *Poem and Symbol: A History of French Symbolism*. London: The Pennsylvania State University Press.
- Gould, Warwick & Marcus, Phillip L. & Sidnell Michael (ed.), (1992). *The Secret Rose, Stories by W.B. Yeats: a Variorum edition*. London: Macmillan.
- Greaves, Richard. (2002). *Transition, Reception and Modernism in W.B. Yeats*. Houndmills: Palgrave.
- Henn, T.R.. (1965). *The Lonely Tower: Studies in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. London: Methuen & Co Ltd..
- Holguist, Michael. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin* (trans. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holguist). Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Iser, Wolfgang. (1978). *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London/Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Iwerdling, Alex. (1966). *Yeats and the Heroic Ideal*, London: Peter Owen.
- Jauss, Hans Robert. (1982). *Toward and Aesthetic of Reception* (trans. Timothy Bahti). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. (1968). *A Commentary on the Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*. London: Macmillan.
- Jeffares, A. Norman. (1978). *W.B. Yeats: Man and Poet*. London/Henley: Routledge/Kegan Paul.
- Jordan, Carmel, (1987). *A Terrible Beauty: The Easter Rebellion and Yeats's "Great Tapestry"*. London/Toronto: Associated University Presses.
- Kermode, Frank. (1957). *Romantic Image*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Chicago: Kinahan, Frank, *Yeats, Folklore, and Occultism: Contexts of Early Work and Thought*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1988.
- Kirschner, Paul & Stillmark, Alexander (ed.), (1992). *Between Time and Eternity*. GA: Amsterdam-Atlanta.
- Kline, Gloria C.. (1983). *The Last Courtly Lover: Yeats and the Idea of Woman*. Michigan: UMI Research Press.



- Larrissy, Edward. (1994). *Yeats the Poet: The Measures of Difference*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Lehmann, A. G.. (1968). *The Symbolist Aesthetic in France 1885-1895*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Lawler, James R., (1969). *The Language of French Symbolism*. Princeton/New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Loizeaux, Elizabeth Bergmann. (1986). *Yeats and the Visual Arts*. New Brunswick/London: Rutgers University Press.
- Lynch, David. (1979). *Yeats: the Poetics of the Self*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.
- Macleish, Archibald. (1960). *Poetry and Experience*. Middlesex: Penguin Books,
- Marcus, Phillip L.. (1992). *Yeats and Artistic Power*. London: Macmillan.
- Maritain, Jacques. (1953). *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Martin, Heather C.. (1986). *W.B. Yeats: Metaphysician as Dramatist*. Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd..
- Mchugh, Roger. (1971). *Ah, Sweet Dancer: W.B. Yeats – Margot Ruddock*. New York: The Macmillan Company.
- Mitchell, W.J.T.(ed.), (1980). *The Language of Images*. Chicago/London.
- Mukarovsky, Jan. (1976). *On Poetic Language*. Lisse: Peter De Ridder Press.
- Mukarovsky, Jan. (1978). *Structure, Sign, and Function*. London: New Haven.
- O’neill, Michael (ed.), (2004). *A Routledge Literary Sourcebook in the Poems of W.B. Yeats*. London: Routledge.
- Oppel, Frances Nesbitt. (1987). *Mask and Tragedy: Yeats and Nietzsche 1902-10*. Virginia: University Press of Virginia.
- Parkin, Andrew. (1978). *The Dramatic Imagination of W.B. Yeats*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Pierce, David. (1995). *Yeats’s Worlds: Ireland, England and the Poetic Imagination*. London/New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Porter, Laurence M.. (1990). *The Crisis of French Symbolism*, Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press.
- Putzel, Steven. (1986). *Reconstructing Yeats: The Secret Rose and the Wind Among the Reeds*. Dublin: Gill and Macmillan.
- Raine, Kathleen. (1999). *W.B. Yeats and the Learning of the Imagination*, Ipswich: Golgonooza Press.
- Reynolds, Dee. (1995). *Symbolist Aesthetics and Early Abstract Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenthal, M. L.. (1994). *Returning to Paradise: Yeats’s Poetic Art*. New York/London: Oxford University Press.
- Rougemont, Denis de. (1956). *Love in the Western World* (trans. Montgomery Belgivn). New York: Pantheon.
- Rudd, Margaret. (1953). *Divided Image: A Study of William Blake and W. B. Yeats*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd..
- Sidnell, Michael J.. (1996). *Yeats’s Poetry and Poetics*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd..
- Steiner, George. (1978). *On Difficulty and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thurley, Geoffrey. (1983). *The Turbulent Dream: Passion and Politics in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats*. London: University of Queensland Press.
- Unterecker, John. (1969). *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats*, London: Thames and Hudson.
- Wade, Allan(ed.). (1954). *The Letters of W.B. Yeats*. London: Rupert Hart-Davis.

- Whitaker, Thomas R.. (1989). *Swan and Shadow: Yeats's Dialogue with History*. Washington: The Catholic Univeristy of America Press.
- White, Anna Macbride & Jeffares Norman (ed.), (1992). *The Gonne-Yeats Letters 1893-1938*. London: Hutchinson.
- Wimsatt, W.K., JR.. (1954). *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press.
- Yeats, W.B.. (1979). *Autobiographies*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd..
- Yeats, W.B.. (1969). *A Vision*. London: Macmillan.
- Yeats, W.B.. (1967). *Essays and Introductions*. London: Macmillan & Co Ltd..
- Yeats, W.B.. (1940). *Letters on Poetry from W.B. Yeats to Dorothy Wellesley*, London: Oxford University Press,
- Yeats, W.B.. (1972). *Memoirs* (ed., Denis Donoghue). London, Macmillan.
- Yeats, W.B.. (1954). *The Letters of W.B. Yeats* (ed., Allan Wade). London: Rupert Hart-Davis.